

VZCZCXYZ0000
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSN #0504/01 0592101
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 282101Z FEB 06
FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1189
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 000504

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2016
TAGS: [ES](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: SAN SALVADOR MAYOR OPINES ON
UPCOMING ELECTIONS

REF: A. 2005 SAN SALVADOR 843

- [1](#)B. 2005 SAN SALVADOR 3259
- [1](#)C. SAN SALVADOR 210
- [1](#)D. SAN SALVADOR 458

Classified By: DCM Michael A. Butler, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) During a February 24 informal lunch at the DCM's residence, incumbent San Salvador Mayor Carlos Rivas Zamora, accompanied by his wife Silvia, talked with DCM and poloff about upcoming elections and other subjects. He began by outlining his recent visit to the United States, during which he participated in a congressional prayer breakfast in Washington attended by President Bush. He marvelled at American political figures' ability to maintain civility and common cause in the face of political differences, and lamented El Salvador's highly-polarized political environment in which such bipartisan cooperation would be unthinkable.

[1](#)2. (C) Rivas Zamora spoke frankly about the process whereby the orthodox-hardliner leadership of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) had marginalized him (see reftel A), and finally made inevitable his resignation from the party. Secretive FMLN strongman Jose Luis Merino, an extremist even among the party's orthodox faction (see reftel B), had during 2005 imparted to Rivas Zamora that the Mayor's moderate, reformist political views were inconsistent with the larger national message the FMLN wished to convey, and that the best Merino could offer under the circumstances would be appointment to the Central American Parliament (PARLACEN), with the assurance that Rivas Zamora would be contacted if his services were ever required in the future. Faced with what amounted to political exile, Rivas Zamora departed the FMLN following the party's July 17, 2005 "primaries" in which he was not allowed to participate, and in which Schafik Handal ally Violeta Menjivar was hand-picked by "consensus" to run in Rivas Zamora's place. (Note: Rivas Zamora will seek reelection as the candidate of a loose center-left coalition of the party newly-formed by FMLN defectors during 2005, the Revolutionary Democratic Front (FDR), the Democratic Change (CD--formerly CDU), and the National Liberation Party (PNL). End note.)

[1](#)3. (C) Turning to the subject of nationwide municipal and Legislative Assembly elections scheduled for March 12, Rivas Zamora opined that his own mayoral candidacy will be handicapped by the Salvadoran electoral practice of ballots bearing only party symbols, rather than candidates' names and/or photos, and that many ill-informed and marginally-literate voters will likely mark the FMLN box in the mistaken belief that they are voting for him (rather than Violeta Menjivar). He complained that the FDR-CD-PNL coalition had declined to offer his own campaign and FDR party a higher profile, telling him that he might be in the driver's seat, but that they were "the vehicle". He

expressed his view that longtime FMLN leader Schafik Handal, who died unexpectedly on January 24 from a massive heart attack (see reftel C), might prove more useful to the FMLN in death than in life, by providing a rallying point as fallen hero. When asked about the post-election fate of the FMLN's few remaining moderates such as Legislative Assembly Deputy Hugo Martinez and Santa Tecla Mayor Oscar Ortiz, he questioned whether the two had truly ever belonged among the ranks of moderates, implying that the root of their troubles with the FMLN's hardliner leadership more likely lay simply in personality conflicts with Schafik Handal. He estimated that the FDR-CD-PDC coalition might pick up 3 to 4 of the 25 Legislative Assembly seats up for grabs March 12 in San Salvador, plus perhaps one each in two other departments. Without openly admitting defeat, the Mayor seemed resigned to the fact that he will not be numbered among those celebrating victory after March 12. (Note: Most polls show the San Salvador mayoral race in a virtual dead heat between the FMLN's Menjivar and ARENA candidate Rodrigo Samayoa, with Rivas Zamora far behind at little more than 5 percent support among voters; see reftel D. End note.)

¶4. (C) The Mayor touched briefly on CAFTA, which El Salvador will be first to implement with the U.S. on March 1, commenting that violent anti-CAFTA demonstrations orchestrated by the FMLN leadership are being carried out by unwitting activists with little understanding of the benefits free trade might entail for the country. With an eye toward his retirement from political life--perhaps sooner rather than later--the Mayor continued to advocate for his vision of a foundation and nongovernmental organization that would seek to educate emerging civic leadership, expand political-electoral literacy, and assist in the maturation of Salvadoran civil society and continued consolidation of its democratic institutions. (Note: Ambassador Barclay, DCM, and poloff met with Rivas Zamora during 2005 to hear the

Mayor outline his proposed foundation, and recommended to Rivas Zamora that perhaps he should first seek the partnership of reputable academic institutions in El Salvador and abroad. End note.) In conversing about the future of any such organization, the Mayor surprised DCM and poloff by handing off the discussion to his wife Silvia, a shy younger woman--and the Mayor's second wife--who has heretofore been content to remain quietly away from the public spotlight. Silvia de Rivas Zamora went on to discuss the Mayor's proposed foundation articulately and thoughtfully, and she will clearly play a central role in its operation should his plan reach fruition.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Mayor Rivas Zamora let slip at least one clue that he may not be quite as ready to withdraw from political life as most observers believe. In commenting on plans to name his proposed foundation and NGO after himself, he said that it would "help maintain his name recognition until 2009"--a clear indication that he would eagerly accept an offer by El Salvador's loose center-left coalition to run for president in 2009. END COMMENT.
Barclay